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Interviewee: Ivan O'Neil

Interviewer: Beth Hodder

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Beth Hodder: My name is Beth Hodder, and I'm with the Northwest Montana Forest Fire Lookout Association. I'm here to interview Ivan O'Neil about his experiences when he was a lookout with the Flathead National Forest.

So, welcome, Ivan, and if you don't mind, I'm going to ask you some questions first about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

Ivan O'Neil: I grew up in Kalispell, Montana. I was born here in 1928, and I've lived here for 88 years, I guess, except for a little bit of time in the service.

BH: Where were you in the service?

IO: I spent most of my time in Seattle, Washington, as a matter of fact.

BH: When did you become interested in the outdoors?

IO: I guess I've always been an outdoor person. I always enjoyed being out in the woods. I was raised by my grandmother. She was the first woman with a group of women to climb Grinnell Peak in Glacier Park in 1903. So, that goes back quite a ways.

BH: What was her name?

IO: Amanda. Excuse me, that's my mother's name. Frieda O'Neil. She was born in Germany. She came over when she was very young, when she was four years old.

BH: Interesting. How did you decide to become a lookout?

IO: In 1944, I just finished my freshman year in high school. That was right after the war, and there was quite a shortage in manpower, among other things. But a group of us—about 10 people—were told that there were summer jobs at the Flathead National Forest out of Coram [MT] to be in brush crews to pile brush. So we all lied about our age a little bit. We were 15 and said we were 16, and we were close. But all ten of us signed up for a brush crew. We were in a brush crew at Coram Ranger Station. I went and brushed after a timber sale.

BH: And that led to then being a lookout?

IO: I did that for one year, a brush crew, and also fighting fires, and trail crew and that type of thing later. But the following year I became a lookout. That was in 1945.

BH: Did you do that because you knew someone who had been a lookout, or that just appealed to you?

IO: No, I just became familiar with it after working there one year [Coram]. And they asked me to come back and be a lookout.

BH: Where were you a lookout?

IO: Where was I? I was on Pioneer Ridge Lookout in the Coram Ranger District. It's now changed to Hungry Horse [Ranger] District, I believe. But at that time it was the Coram Ranger District.

BH: Where is the lookout located?

IO: It was above the [South Fork Flathead] River. Now it's above the [Hungry Horse] Reservoir, about 25, 30 miles upriver from Coram.

BH: So, it was the river and later on it was dammed.

IO: It was dammed in 1950—they started the dam, I think. A lot of the roads and trails and the ranger station I was closest to was at Elk Park. That's under water now.

BH: When were you a lookout?

IO: In 1945 for about six weeks.

BH: You said what agency you worked for. It was the Flathead [National Forest] and then the Coram Ranger District.

IO: Correct.

BH: Did you work out of Coram, out of the ranger station there?

IO: Right. My telephone was connected to the telephone at the ranger station in Coram.

BH: Do you remember the name and the title of the person you worked for?

IO: Jim Root was the ranger. I was there three years and there were three different rangers, so that's all I can think of offhand though.

BH: Was it a lookout tower or did it sit on the ground?

IO: It was two-story, but it wasn't a tower, if that's what you mean.

BH: Uh-huh.

IO: It was two-story, and the living quarters were on the second story, and above that they had a little cupola. It was a wood structure entirely.

BH: So, was it a boarded one, or—I've seen some of the old lookouts that were two-story that were made out of logs.

IO: This was not made out of logs, but it was kind of sided and what I call "slabs" sometimes. That was the lower floor. And, of course, the top, the main, was all windows.

BH: Do you know what the style of the lookout was? Did they have a name for it?

IO: I don't recall. It was just one of the first ones in that area, because most of the rest of them were on metal towers, or Battery and I think Baptiste, which is still there [were wooden]. That's the only one that's still there I believe, in that area. I don't know about Kah Mountain. Do you have a lookout on Kah Mountain?

BH: There was a lookout on Kah. I don't think there is anymore.

IO: I don't think so. That was in a different district, up on Spotted Bear District at the time.

BH: Were there other outbuildings there, sheds, or a cabin or anything?

IO: No. Nothing else there.

BH: Did you sleep in the lookout then?

IO: Oh yeah. You're on duty 24 hours a day. That's not like they have them now. They figure eight hours a day is enough now, I guess.

BH: Did they give you time off ever or you were up there the whole time, the whole six weeks, you said?

IO: Yep. Didn't get off it once. Oh, we got off the following year once. It rained before V-J Day, and so then they gave us the day off and the weekend. Came down and celebrated with the rest of the people.

BH: Oh, did you? Did you celebrate in Kalispell?

IO: Yeah, in Kalispell.

BH: Nice.

IO: Well, we started out celebrating in Elk Park, where there was a patrol cabin.

BH: Who was “we?” You said “we celebrated there.”

IO: Well, the other lookout was a friend of mine, George Ostrom, which you’ve heard about, undoubtedly. He was on Battery [Mountain] at that time, and we both got notice at the same time we could come down. We were friends in high school. So we met at Elk Park and then we had to wait for our ride to go the rest of the way, so we were probably out at Elk Park for several hours before we got a ride down the rest of the way.

BH: That must have been pretty exciting.

IO: It was. Um-hmm. And to cross the [South Fork Flathead] river, I crossed on a bridge, and George had to ford the river or else he’d have to go a long way.

BH: I asked if you slept in the lookout. Did you sleep on a cot or a bed or bunk bed?

IO: It was on an iron-framed spring and mattress. Of course, everything was wired to the ground, everything metal.

BH: Right. And how did you communicate with headquarters, did you have a telephone or radio?

IO: Telephone. Didn’t have any radios at that time. I did have a broadcast band radio on my lookout, though, that I brought up myself.

BH: So you could pick up some local stations?

IO: I could pick up some Kalispell stations.

BH: Can you tell me about your water source, where it was, how you had to haul it?

IO: When I first got there, it was about a half mile down the ridge, but as it dried up high, I had to go down lower to pick it up. I think the furthest away it was was probably a mile, but most of the time it was within the half- to three-quarters of a mile.

BH: Could you drive there at that time or did you have to take the trail?

IO: No. It was all trail. I was three miles from the closest road.

BH: So, to get the water, then, was it on the south slope or the north slope?

IO: Northeast slope.

BH: That would have been a walk then to get that.

Tell me how you cooked your meals.

IO: Well, we were given a crate of food—a big wooden box of food. It had a lot of canned materials in it, even canned potatoes, everything. Any meat we had was canned, and I remember Spam particularly. We had some corned beef canned; that was pretty good. As a matter of fact, there was a certain brand of corned beef that I really liked. It was pretty good.

BH: Like Hormel or something?

IO: Yeah, it came from Argentina, as a matter of fact. El Fido or something.

BH: What kinds of meals did you cook?

IO: I cooked everything. I even made a thimbleberry pie.

BH: Oh, nice. Have you ever done that since? I've never had a thimbleberry pie.

IO: No, it's not very successful.

BH: Not quite like raspberries.

IO: No. I have a lot of Norwegian in me, and I tried to make lefse one time. [Laughs]. That wasn't very successful, either. About a quarter inch thick.

BH: Did you have a cookbook to help you?

IO: I don't recall that, no.

I had one visitor that first year. That was a packer going through to a fire or—I can't remember. Anyway, he brought me some steak, and I really appreciated that.

BH: I bet.

IO: That was the only visitor I had that first year.

BH: Did you have visitors other years?

IO: The next year I had one or two people just going though, maybe hiking up to Clayton Lake. It's the wrong way to go. It's a long way to Clayton Lake. There's an easier way to go. You don't have to go up that ridge.

BH: Oh, so how do you get there, because I'm interested in going up to the lookout site, and I've gone to Clayton Lake.

IO: I'm sure the trail's still there. It was 25 years ago when I last visited.

BH: Does it come in from the south, or—?

IO: From Handkerchief Lake access. You know where Handkerchief Lake is? You can drive that far now. You couldn't have when I was there, but you can drive to Handkerchief Lake and there's a trailhead. One trail. I'm not sure just how they go now, but at one time there was a trailhead, and it had then a split. One went up the ridge, and one went up the creek. And the one up the creek was the way to get to Clayton Lake, but the one to the ridge is where you go to the lookout. It's a nice hike. I think it was about three miles off the road. But that year I didn't come down at all until the season was over. Didn't come down very often. But then I probably just walked the road. Later on when I went out I had to go out on I had to go about eight miles to get to the [Coram] Ranger Station.

BH: Do you know if the lookout is still standing?

IO: No, there's nothing standing. Not at all.

BH: Do you know what happened to it?

IO: Well, the lookout building I was in was I think replaced I would guess in the early '50s by a newer building, and that newer building was there when I went up there about 25 years ago. There's nothing there now, I understand. I haven't been up there. I should get back, but it's a little far for me to hike these days.

BH: Did you always hike when you went then, or did you take horses or anything ever?

IO: No, I always hiked.

BH: How did you get supplies? Did you have supplies brought to you?

IO: That box was it.

BH: That was all. So that lasted you for six weeks.

IO: Um-hmm.

BH: Wow. How did you do laundry?

IO: Very seldom. [Both laugh]. I don't recall. I'm sure it wasn't a big problem.

BH: Do you remember the names of any neighboring lookouts—structures and people?

IO: The closest one was probably Battery Lookout, which was upriver about five air miles, something like that, and it was staffed part of that first year by my cousin, Bob O'Neil, who is still in town here. He's a retired English professor from the University of California at Fresno, and the second year, George Ostrom was up there, who was a good friend of mine. So that took care of Battery.

The one south of there was Kah Mountain, and that lookout was on a different district, and I never had any association with it.

The other lookout that was not manned at all was Wildcat, and that was up the ridge, north and west of Pioneer. Wildcat. And I was there on trail. I cleared the trail up there one year, and there were some goats all around that lookout when I was there, so that's kind of interesting.

And across the river, the closest one was Canyon. That was manned by an older man. I don't remember his name. His lookout was different. It was on the side of a mountain, but it had a pretty good view of down low in the valley. It was the second lookout up in that district.

Desert Mountain was the first one. That's the one still there, right by Coram. I can't tell you that guy's name.

Across the river Baptiste was manned for a while that summer, and one of the fellows there was Rick Waller, who was the grandson of [Frank B.] Linderman. He was a classmate of mine, also. He lasted seven days [Both laugh]. When he ran out of candy, he came home. And I think Jack King might have been on that, too [Baptiste]. Jack is a retired banker from Valley Bank [Kalispell]. I don't think he was there very long. It wasn't manned. They just put someone on Baptiste when the fire danger was real high, and there had been some problems. There were certain areas where they could see where nobody else could see into.

So that was about it. I was the third person up in the district. There was Desert [Mountain], Canyon, and Pioneer.

BH: Not Firefighter?

IO: Firefighter, I don't remember it being manned at all. I think there was a road up there. That's way downriver, of course. I just don't remember that much about Firefighter.

BH: Yeah. I just thought because you had Desert and Canyon, Firefighter was kind of in between. But they may not have had it.

IO: Firefighter still has a building, and Baptiste still has a building, and Desert, of course. Does Desert have a building now?

BH: No. They have communication equipment up there, and they used to have a shed, and I don't even know that that's there now. I'm not sure.

IO: The last time I was up there I was on skis, so I don't know. That wasn't too usual.

BH: Speaking of Baptiste and Canyon that they could see so much lower because of their location.

IO: That was kind of a unique spot [Canyon]. Most lookouts run on top of a mountain, or on top of a ridge or something, but this one was really maybe the elevation of probably 7500 feet. No, wouldn't be that high. See, the reservoir there is probably now at 3,500 at the most. I'd say the lookout was about at 6,000 foot. They had a unique position. It was something like there was a Spotted Bear Lookout. It was up at Spotted Bear [Ranger Station] and it could see right down the river, and I suppose this kind of picked up for that, down further on the river.

BH: Could you see all the way to the river?

IO: I couldn't see the river itself. I think the ridges—there were always some mountains.

BH: Were there any buildings or anything you could see down there?

IO: No.

BH: Did you have any pets or anything at the lookout with you?

IO: No. George had a dog there [at Battery Mountain Lookout], and it had about four-inch legs, and when he crossed the river, it ended up about a mile and a half down the river. [Both laugh].

BH: What were your main duties as a lookout?

IO: Well, the primary duty was, of course, to look for fires and lightning strikes. You'd watch for lightning strikes and recorded them with your alidade. Incidentally, I have an alidade.

BH: Oh, you do.

IO: I talked a supervisor out of it years later. I have an alidade and I also have the maps from mounted on tin that would fit in the alidade, and I got the one from Pioneer.

BH: I'll be darned.

IO: That was kind of neat. They threw them away after that, or junked them.

BH: Yeah, I think you're right. When they got rid of the lookouts, they might have even burned them or something.

IO: They were all steel. They were heavier than heck. I got it down at my cabin at the lake.

BH: Nice. Did you have certain times when you had to do a particular duty, like scanning for fires?

IO: Just after a storm, and then of course, you checked where you located strikes. You checked that area as well as you could with binoculars.

BH: How did you keep track of the lightning strikes?

IO: My situation was a little different from most of them. I was in a little cupola on the third floor, you might say, but there was only about this much space between the alidade and the wall. I can remember one time I was up there and had the earphones on and talking to the ranger station probably, about reporting of something, and a lightning strike hit the wire, probably a mile away. But that really shook me up. It jolted me so bad my back was sore for the rest of the season, I think. It knocked me into the windowsill.

BH: Were you a smokechaser, also?

IO: Yeah, I was on probably three or four fires. If there were anything on the ridge, I could get to them real easy, and Pioneer seemed to attract quite a few lightning strikes, so I did go on a few fires.

BH: Was Pioneer as open as it is now in terms of trees?

IO: Right at the top there was kind of an open area from the lookout. All the trees were below me. It didn't interfere with vision at all.

BH: How many fires did you spot, quite a few?

IO: Did I spot? Oh, I don't know how many. We didn't have an awful lot of fires, and in those days they used to fight fires instead of let them burn, so there were no large fires. I was not on any large fires from the lookout at all. I did later fight some fires that were larger.

BH: Did you have any memorable ones? You mentioned the strike.

IO: There was one down the ridge quite a ways toward Wildcat [Lookout] that they had smokejumpers jump on. I don't remember if that was the first or second year, but that was kind of nice, because they left me all their rations they didn't want to burn down the hill. I remember getting some not really fresh food but at least some different food.

BH: What about your experiences with wildlife, did you have any up there?

IO: I had several sightings of grizzlies when you walked through the opening. I was never threatened at all. I've never been threatened with grizzlies. I've been hiking in the park [Glacier National Park] for 45, 50 years. I've had [them] close enough to jump me, but never been charged or anything like that.

BH: Did you have deer or packrats?

IO: I don't remember packrats. I had lots of deer around. I don't remember ever seeing any elk up there. Goats on a couple occasions.

BH: Did your lookout experiences turn out to be what you thought they would be?

IO: I don't know what I expected. It was entirely new to me, and I was a kid of 15, 16.

BH: What stands out in your memory about your experience as a lookout?

IO: I enjoyed it. I really did enjoy it. I enjoyed being out in the wild and also being entirely free and on your own boss kind of.

BH: Did the solitude bother you or you enjoyed that it, too?

IO: It didn't. I don't remember it bothering me a bit. It did bother some of the guys. They just couldn't take it. But maybe it's because I was an only child and, at my home at least, didn't have any other kids around.

BH: What's the most memorable experience you had?

IO: I don't know of anything that really stands out. I remember going to a couple of fires way north but they were really small, just a snag or something.

BH: Did you have anything weird happen to you up there?

IO: No.

BH: What about the hardest thing about being a lookout?

IO: The worst job was getting water, of course. I had a water bag, a five-gallon container, but it was all fabric. It always leaked, so you'd end up with a back full of water going in and down your butt and everywhere else.

BH: How often did you have to haul it then? Probably a lot if it leaked.

IO: Yeah, I think you lost probably a quarter of it on the way up, but it depended upon how far away [you had to haul it]. I dug out—I talked to you about going down the creek—as the water receded down the hill, where the water came out of the ground, I would try and make kind of a little pond so I could dip the water out easier, and the first one I did, I did quite a good job and I could fill up the bag pretty fast. But if you're just waiting for a trickle into a five-gallon bucket, it can take quite a while.

BH: Did you have anything to store the water in besides the bag?

IO: I had a container in the lookout of heavy metal.

BH: How much water did it hold?

IO: I think only five gallons.

BH: Yeah, that's kind of similar today even. Did you have any frightening experiences?

IO: Probably the worst one was when the lightning hit the lookout. That was kind of exciting. Of course, I was out in my cupola at that time. I'd go down and sit in my chair and would see a fireball on the top of your range and things like that. That was kind of exciting, but that only happened really once. And then a second time was it hit the telephone line, I assume, but it was a little ways away.

BH: What was the best thing you remember about being a lookout or that you enjoyed?

IO: Something that was kind of unique: George Ostrom was on Battery [Lookout]. We'd talk daily, talked a lot back and forth. He was a trumpet player, and he'd play his trumpet, and I'd listen to his trumpet playing. I think I could probably hear some of it without the radio, I don't know, without the telephone.

I had an AM radio, so I could listen to KGEZ [Kalispell] and relay the news to him how the war was going and all that stuff.

BH: I didn't even realize KGEZ was around that long.

IO: KGEZ was the second oldest station in the state. The first one was in Plentywood, Montana, and the second one was started by Dr. Lamb, who was a ham radio operator. He started KGEZ, a very well known doctor at that period of time.

BH: Did you have a patrol point that you could also walk out to?

IO: Not an official one, but there was one area down toward Clayton Lake that I couldn't see from the lookout, but if I went about a quarter of a mile down the ridge, there was another little hump, and I could see that area. So I tried to check that, particularly if I saw a strike down there. I'd walk and check it out.

BH: Was there a trail there?

IO: It was all on trail. The trail went all the way along the ridge, past the lookout, all the way over to Wildcat.

BH: What did you do to keep from getting bored?

IO: I don't remember being bored. I read quite a bit; I'd taken several books up with me and read them, but I don't remember particularly being bored.

BH: Did you listen to a clarinet or—?

IO: I didn't have any real hobbies at that time that I was busy with.

BH: Can you describe what the inside of the lookout looked like?

IO: Of course, all around it from the main floor was glass, so you didn't have any walls to worry about. The bed was on one side, and the opposite side was the kitchen area, where I had a stove and cupboards. The cupboards were all down low.

BH: Did you have a table?

IO: Yeah, I had a fair-sized table and two, three chairs.

BH: Was the radio a crank one?

IO: My telephone, you mean?

BH: I'm sorry, telephone, yes.

IO: It was a crank one. I was two shorts and a long, I think.

BH: And what was Coram [Ranger Station] or whoever was your main contact?

IO: Coram would answer in, I think, a long, and dispatch would pick it up there. I spent my fourth year in the Forest Service as a dispatcher in a little district in Washington. That was after my freshman year in college.

BH: And did you just stay there the one year?

IO: Yeah, I was only there for the summer.

BH: If you had to do it over again, would you be a lookout?

IO: Yes.

BH: So it was a good enough experience.

IO: It learned you to be independent, that's for sure. You do everything yourself, all your washing and personal hygiene and cooking, and everything involved in it.

BH: Did being a lookout change how you looked at life?

IO: Maybe, it probably did. I'm sure it influenced me somewhat, but I don't remember anything specific.

BH: Have you got any other thoughts you'd like to share?

IO: I don't believe so. I think I told you about the time at V-J Day, walking out and meeting George at the bottom. I walked out across the bridge, which was at least eight miles. He had a shorter walk, but he had to cross the river, so it was after dark by the time we got down there, and he shot off his rifle—he was carrying a rifle, notifying me when he got down there. And I went out and held a lantern up so he could see where to go somewhat. That was one of the highlights, probably, our second year up there.

Of course I have lots of memories of trail maintenance. About half the time I was there was on trail crew. I did a lot of telephone work at that time, climbing trees, and poles and that type thing. Since I was in eighth grade, I always had a job doing something, so I was used to working and having employment when I was a younger kid.

[Background: Ivan's computer says, "It's 2 o'clock."]

BH: Time to call the interview, I guess.

IO: Must be.

BH: Thank you very much for letting me talk to you.

IO: You bet. And others: I think I told you Jack King was up the North Fork most of the time, and my cousin, Bob O'Neil, who spent actually five summers working for the Forest Service. He's a retired professor of English in California. George Ostrom, of course. And a good friend of mine now, who lives a couple blocks away, Walt Bahr. He was out of the Bigfork District in the Swan. But he had very similar experiences. I think he worked four years. He was on several different lookouts in that four years.

BH: Well, fine. If you don't mind, I'd like to get that information from you and get a hold of them to do the same thing.

IO: All those people were in school. Walt graduated from Bigfork; the rest of us graduated from Flathead [High School] in '46.

BH: Excellent. Thank you. I really appreciate your time.

IO: You bet.

[End of Interview]